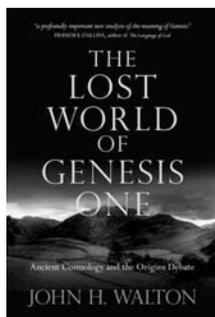


Discovering Common Ground in *The Lost World of Genesis One* | BY BRENTON READING

A review of *The Lost World of Genesis One* by John H. Walton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).



John H. Walton, below; his latest book, above.



You are a materialist. Actually, to one degree or another, we all are. From God-fearing, young-earth creationists to atheistic evolutionists, all of us assume a material ontology. That is, we understand the existence of the universe from the perspective of how the material got here. This perspective has been dominant since the time of the enlightenment and the rise of modernity when Sir Isaac Newton described a mechanistic universe ruled by a God who is the biggest, most skillful mechanical engineer in...well, in the universe.

Prior to modernity, scientific understanding was vastly different from our own. The ancients believed from a functional ontology. In other words, they considered existence from the perspective of how things function in an ordered system and are useful to daily life. These differences are vital to understanding ancient creation accounts and in particular the first chapter of Genesis. At least, this is the contention of John H. Walton in his book *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*.

Walton proposes understanding Genesis 1 from an ancient functional ontology rather than a modern material ontology. This perspective is “faithful to the context of the original audience and author, and one that preserves and enhances the theological vitality of this text.” Astute readers will recognize that Walton’s exegesis of Genesis’ creation account presents a way to honor the biblical account of origins in an ancient and literal sense while at the same time allowing openness to the moving target

that is the best and most current scientific consensus on origins.

Readers who interpret Genesis from a traditional, fundamentalist perspective may be tempted to read into Walton’s exegesis that God was not involved in material origins. Therefore, Walton clearly states, “*Viewing Genesis 1 as an account of functional origins of the cosmos as temple does not in any way suggest or imply that God was uninvolved in material origins—it only contends that Genesis 1 is not that story.*” Furthermore, Walton specifies, “The point is *not* that the biblical text therefore supports an old earth, but simply that there is no biblical position on the age of the earth.” However, whether one finds these assertions and Walton’s 18 well-organized, succinctly-presented propositions persuasive will largely be determined by one’s preconceived assumptions and where one falls along the spectrum of perspectives on the origins debate.

That this spectrum even exists is often unrecognized since the dominant poles of biblical-literalist, young-earth creationists and atheistic dysteleological (without discernable purpose) evolutionists effectively encompass or exclude into their mutually reinforcing antagonistic orbits all other views (e.g. old earth/young life creationists, gap theorists, progressive creationists, creationary evolutionists, etc.). Those of us inhabiting the no man’s land between the warring dominant poles will likely find Walton’s exploration of Genesis 1 from the ancient audience’s perspective intriguing and even faith-building. Others, in the more extreme positions, who still recognize the necessity of different

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viewpoints for diverse personalities and a more complete perspective may at least find that Walton's book opens room for conversation.

A Range of Interpretations

Interpretations of Genesis can be broadly divided into two categories. The "concordist" view attempts to read the ancient text in modern scientific terms. This category includes young earth creationists, day-age creationists, and gap theory creationists, all of whom look for scientific information in the Genesis text to both answer modern questions and to establish divine inspiration. The other "literary" view sees in the Genesis creation account literary devices which serve to make theological points rather than answer scientific questions. Since Walton rejects scientific concordance, his book would seem to fall within the "literary" category. In fact, he mentions that his interpretation of Genesis does not preclude a literary reading but could instead provide additional depth alongside a literary perspective.

However, in addition to scientific concordance, there are at least two other types of concordance to consider. Theological concordance is held in common by all theistic readings of Genesis. Historical concordance has generally been expected only with scientific concordance in so-called "concordist" views—until now. Walton's interpretation establishes common ground between the two broad interpretive categories. Unlike strict concordist interpretations, Walton gives respect to the human author and the ancient context. On the other hand, in contrast to some literary approaches, he affirms that the Israelites would have understood Genesis 1 in a literal historical sense and more importantly used the text as more than just literary/theological metaphor.

The Sabbath and the Sanctuary

So, how does this novel approach to Genesis unfold? Well, it might not be such a novel approach for those of us with an Adventist background. You see, Walton grounds the text

on the firm foundation of the sanctuary, and he further highlights the seventh day of creation—heralding the present truth of the Sabbath. He reads Genesis 1 as a cosmic temple inauguration culminating in God's rest on day seven. In this inauguration, the cosmos represents a functional temple or sanctuary. God's rest at the conclusion of the creation account is understood as God's presence in a now functional and stable cosmos with the role of ruling, sustaining, and providentially guiding creation toward the fullness of the Kingdom of God through a process of ongoing creation.

In Walton's view, the first three days of creation are about assigning the fundamental functions of life: time, weather, and food. Days four through six then describe the sequential installation of functionaries within each of these functional realms. At the end of each day's activity, God's pronouncement "It was good" is often interpreted as a statement of completed perfection with moral implications. However, given this functional framework, God's statement could be interpreted, "It was working well." "By naming the functions and installing the functionaries, and finally by deity entering his resting place, the temple comes into existence—it is created in the inauguration ceremony."

Then comes Sabbath. Walton's view of Genesis 1 provides a significant contribution to our theology of the Sabbath. At least it will for some. He writes, "In the traditional view that Genesis 1 is an account of material origins, day seven is mystifying. It appears to be nothing more than an afterthought with theological concerns about Israelites observing the Sabbath—an appendix, a postscript, a tack on." This critique certainly applies to fundamentalists outside the Seventh-day Adventist tradition. For example, a slick multimedia presentation on the days of creation at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, ends abruptly after the sixth day with a blank screen and an awkward silence echoing the absent climax—the celebratory fulfillment of creation on day seven. In distinction, traditional Adventists, even with a deeply ingrained materi-

alistic understanding of the Genesis creation account, see the Sabbath as quite literally a central command to honor God as creator—anything but a tack on.

However, Walton also speaks to this traditional Adventist view of the Sabbath as an arbitrary command to memorialize God as creator. In this view, God's example and later command of rest is the reason for the Sabbath observance, and we therefore observe Sabbath by ceasing from our work as God did. Walton responds, "God is not asking us to imitate his Sabbath rest... Instead, he is asking us to recognize that he is at the controls, not us." He goes on to stress that "Sabbath isn't the sort of thing that should have to be regulated by rules. It is the way we acknowledge that God is on the throne, that this world is his world, that our time is his gift to us." The meaning of the Sabbath is expanded through an understanding of divine rest as God inhabiting the cosmos and calling us forward toward a unified future in which, as E.G. White puts it, "one pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation."¹ In this view, the material resources of creation are anything but natural and are not just for us and our exploitation. Rather, the material world deserves our care and respect since it is an integral part of God's whole sacred sanctuary.

Walton's view of the sanctuary is remarkably similar in substance if not in scope to the Adventist view of the earthly sanctuary as a copy of the true sanctuary in heaven. However, rather than boxing God the Father and Jesus within a literal structure in heaven, moving from room to room on pre-specified dates, this cosmic view expands our view of the sanctuary and affirms a more intimate association of the Triune God with all of creation. Walton provides a guided tour of the sanctuary, or temple as he calls it, revealing a movement from chaos to order. He demonstrates that the familiar sanctuary furnishings which Adventists correctly see pointing forward to Jesus and ultimately to God in heaven also send us back to God and the installation of the functions of life on earth during the days of creation.

A Singular Focus

Admittedly, Walton's perspective on distinctive Adventist themes such as Sabbath, sanctuary, and creation is at variance with traditional Adventist beliefs. Some will see this as a faith-challenging weakness while others will find the fresh perspective a horizon-expanding strength. Similarly,

depending on one's perspective, the book's distinctive strength may also be its greatest weakness—the singular focus on Genesis 1. In a very brief section on Genesis 2 and Romans 5, Walton acknowledges the understanding of a literal Adam and Eve in both old and new testaments. He writes, "Whatever evolutionary processes led to the development of animal life, primates, and even prehuman hominids, my theological convictions lead me to posit substantive discontinuity between that process and the creation of the historical Adam and Eve. Rather than cause-and-effect continuity, there is material and spiritual discontinuity, though it remains difficult to articulate how God accomplished this." His concluding understatement offers a challenging direction for those inclined to pick up where Walton trails off and continue re-discovering Genesis into chapter two and beyond.

There is much more in the book worthy of discussion, including Walton's definitions of original Hebrew terms, explorations of other ancient creation stories, and opinions on science education. On these topics and more, Walton's book is a unique combination of academic insight and accessible writing. Whether or not there is ultimately agreement that Genesis 1 is best understood as a description of functional rather than material creation, *The Lost World of Genesis One* clears new ground for launching further theological exploration, discovers common ground for everyone to join in conversation, and creates functional ground in which to sink deep roots of faith. ■

Brenton Reading writes from Shawnee, KS, where he lives with his wife Nola and their three children. He is a pediatric interventional radiologist at Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, MO.

Footnotes

1. White, Ellen G. *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan*. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1888, 1950), 678.